

Alba Pratalia



1070

The mona who bangs the door

THE MONA WHO BANGS
THE DOOR
AND CLOSES SCREAMING

By Alba Pratalia

It's a dimly lit dive bar in a forgotten part of town, the kind of place where the neon flickers more than it glows, and the beer taps haven't seen a cleaning since the last presidential scandal. A scattering of patrons sit slumped over their drinks, each drowning their own unspoken tragedies in cheap liquor. The room reeks of stale smoke and desperation—just the kind of place Hank would call home. Tonight, the sign outside reads: "Stand-Up Comedy Hour—featuring Hank Howky." But if the bartender was hoping for laughs, he probably should have booked a juggler or a singing dog. Hank stumbles onto the stage, a half-empty bottle of whiskey clutched in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, the smoke curling into the dank air like his fading dreams. He pauses at the mic, squinting through a haze of booze and whatever cocktail of uppers and downers is buzzing through his bloodstream. The few heads in the audience turn slowly, expecting some acerbic humor, maybe a riff on the absurdity of existence or a sarcastic jab at the human condition. But Hank just stares back at them, his bloodshot eyes swimming with a deep, haunted sorrow. "Good evening," he slurs, barely able to stand upright, "or whatever the hell it is. Not sure it matters. Time's a joke, right?" A confused murmur ripples through the room. They're expecting punchlines, but Hank's expression is as solemn as a gravestone.

He fumbles in his jacket, pulling out a crumpled stack of papers—his poems, the ones he usually reads to the ghosts in his run-down motel room when the loneliness gets too thick to bear. Tonight, though, he's too far gone to know where he is or what he's supposed to be doing. Stand-up comedy? Poetry reading? Who can keep track of such trivial distinctions?

"This one's called *Eulogy for the Forgotten,*" he mutters into the mic, the feedback whining like a wounded animal. The audience shifts uncomfortably in their seats. He launches into the poem, voice wavering between despair and defiance:

*We are the shadows that slink through alleys,
Staring at the world through cracked glass and broken
dreams.*

*We are the ghosts that haunt our own lives,
Living on borrowed booze and expired hope,
Too stubborn to die, too empty to live."*

A guy near the front laughs awkwardly, thinking it's some kind of dark joke. But Hank keeps reading, his voice growing thicker with emotion. He sways on his feet, clutching the mic stand like it's the only thing keeping him tethered to this dismal reality.

*Tell me, what's so funny about a life circling the drain?
What's so amusing about a heart beating out of habit?
We're all just waiting for that final punchline,*

*But all we get is the silence that follows,
A room full of empty glasses and absent smiles."*

The crowd is dead silent now. No one's laughing anymore. Maybe they're not sure if they should be laughing in the first place. Maybe they've realized that the joke isn't on Hank—it's on all of them.

Hank's voice cracks, and for a moment he seems to snap out of his stupor, realizing where he is and what's happening. But instead of trying to salvage the set, he lets out a low, bitter chuckle, a sound that feels more like a sigh.

"Comedy, right? Who the hell knew it'd be this sad?"

He drops the mic, the thud echoing through the room, and stumbles off the stage, taking a swig from the whiskey bottle as he disappears into the shadows. The audience sits there in stunned silence, unsure if they just witnessed a stand-up routine, a meltdown, or a moment of raw, unfiltered truth.

And maybe it doesn't matter. Because Hank Howky, poet of the last ones, just delivered a punchline too real to laugh at.

Hank was sprawled out on the bus stop floor like a cautionary tale no one would tell. His pen, still clutched in one hand, scribbled half-coherent lines about a pigeon that pecked around under the bench, indifferent to Hank's state and life's general absurdity. The pigeon, probably the only creature that found itself at home in this miserable scene, was hunting for crumbs left by passengers too busy to notice Hank, or the futility of it all. Hank, though, was deep in it—deeper than the whiskey bottle he had drained dry and the lingering haze from something stronger he had puffed into his lungs. Mid-metaphor about the pigeon's freedom—or maybe just the pigeon's apathy—he slumped to the side, his head resting on the cold concrete and a leg dangling into the bus lane. Time passed, as it always does, with absolutely no regard for Hank or his poetic endeavors. A couple of morning commuters, perhaps recognizing him as the local literary disaster, stepped over him, barely avoiding his outstretched limbs. But then came the real concern—a bus barreling down the street, unaware that Hank's leg was too close to being reduced to roadkill. An old lady with a shopping cart full of who-knows-what muttered something about "damn drunks" and poked him with her cane. But it was some kid, earbuds in and a skateboard under one arm, who finally bent down and lifted Hank's leg back onto the curb.

“Hey, man, you’re gonna get yourself killed,” the kid said, with the kind of nonchalant detachment Hank might’ve admired if he was awake.

Hank snorted, still unconscious, but with his leg now safely out of the bus’s path, the kid shrugged and went back to his morning. The bus roared by, oblivious, as Hank rolled onto his back, muttering something about “freedom” and “feathered prophets” in his sleep. And the pigeon? It fluttered away, bored, just like everyone else.

A dingy bar with a broken neon sign that flickers "N G T," leaving you wondering if they meant "Night" or "Not." The place smells like regret mixed with a hint of stale beer. Hank's on his fifth—maybe tenth?—shot of bourbon. Who's counting? Certainly not him. He's blind drunk, slumped over the counter, muttering to himself as if a whiskey bottle holds the secrets of the universe. He's trying to wrestle with that last metaphor—something about life being like a cigarette butt in a gutter—but it keeps slipping away, and all he can think to do is bash his forehead against the sticky counter. Thud. Thud. Thud. Each hit a punctuation mark on his own existential crisis, and even the bartender's stopped bothering to ask if he's okay. They both know he isn't. Then she walks in, or rather stumbles. Her hair's a tangled mess, like she's been in a brawl with a windstorm and the windstorm won. She scans the place, sees Hank—a perfect candidate for a regrettable decision. She's got that look of someone who's been burned by life one too many times, looking for a different kind of fire, maybe one that burns out quick. She swaggers up to him, leans on the bar, and says, "You got a light?"

Hank, barely lifting his head from the counter, fumbles in his pockets for a lighter. He finds it after a struggle, flicks it open, and manages to light her cigarette on the third try, his hands shaking. He still hasn't said a word, still

muttering under his breath about his missing metaphor, something about "the dogs of the night" or "the last damn flicker."

"What's that you're mumbling?" she asks, exhaling smoke that curls like a question mark.

Hank looks up at her, squinting like she's the sun he hasn't seen in days. "It's... it's the last one. The last goddamn metaphor. It's somewhere in this bourbon, I know it. But it just—won't—come—out." He slams his head against the bar once more, for emphasis. She takes a long drag, then sighs, like she's just made a decision she'll regret in approximately four hours. "You know, I don't need much more than a place to crash tonight," she says, her voice low, like a half-hearted confession. Hank squints at her, trying to piece together her words like fragments of some unfinished poem. "What? You want to sleep with me or something?"

She shrugs. "Yeah. Sure. Why not?"

Hank lets out a half-laugh, half-sob, as if he can't decide whether it's the best or worst thing that's happened to him tonight. He gestures to the bartender for another shot, but the bartender's already walking away, shaking his head.

"You know," Hank says, looking at her through glassy eyes, "this could be the metaphor I've been looking for."

She rolls her eyes. "Just shut up and take me wherever you're staying before I change my mind."

And so, Hank stumbles off the barstool, swaying like a man with nothing left to lose, which he pretty much is. He takes her hand—no poetry in the gesture, just desperation—and they head out into the night. Maybe he'll find his metaphor in the morning, when the hangover comes like the cruelest punchline. But for now, he's got a warm body next to him and the bitter taste of bourbon in his mouth, and that'll have to do.

Spitting out his brand of misery-laden humor to a crowd that wasn't really listening—more interested in drowning their own sorrows in cheap drafts and questionable bourbon. Hank was deep into one of his “visionary” bits, ranting about how existence was just one long, drawn-out joke with a punchline none of us were ever gonna get. The crowd, if you could even call it that, was a mix of the usual—washed-up has-beens, never-gonna-bes, and a few barflies too drunk to stand but not drunk enough to ignore Howky's rambling. In the background, the bar had its Spotify playlist on shuffle—a tragic attempt to cater to everyone. Tonight, it was neck-deep in the electronic despair of K-pop, something Hank despised with every fiber of his jaundiced soul. He'd even woven it into the act, mocking the soulless synth beats between punchlines about tax evasion and the beauty of a life lived without purpose. He'd just gotten to a joke about selling his soul for a pack of menthols when the Spotify algorithm—probably as depressed as he was—decided to throw a wrench into the night. A glitch, a hiccup, a miracle from whatever cruel gods handle the wires, and suddenly the synth-pop faded out. In its place came the first silky, smooth notes of Tony Bennett's voice, crooning through the bar's scratched-up speakers. And that was it. Hank stopped mid-joke, mouth half-open, staring into the middle distance like he'd just seen a ghost. The crowd

thought it was part of the act at first, a moment of tragicomic silence. But no, Hank wasn't saying anything. He wasn't laughing or smirking. He just stood there, eyes going glassy. See, Hank wasn't built for moments like these—honest, raw, too close to the bone. Tony's voice poured over the room, drowning out the clinking glasses and murmured conversations. It was a song that had the audacity to be beautiful, that remembered a world before auto-tune and empty lyrics, a world where music could make you feel something besides the beat. And Hank, poor bastard, he felt it. The tears came, hot and sudden. They cut tracks through the grime on his face, dripping onto the mic like tiny explosions. He tried to wipe them away, but they just kept coming, an ocean of regret and old jazz standards. He tried to start up again, make some crack about "this damn song taking a guy back," but his voice cracked, betraying him. So he just let it happen. Stood there, shaking, while Tony sang about love lost or remembered—hell, it didn't even matter. The crowd watched in uncomfortable silence, witnessing a kind of breakdown they hadn't paid for but couldn't look away from. It was the most real thing any of them had seen in ages, and they hated him for it. Hated him for reminding them that even in the darkest, most forgotten dive bar, a glitch in the system could still punch you in the gut and make you feel human again. And for that brief, agonizing

moment, Hank Howky wasn't the poet of the forgotten; he was just another poor bastard who'd remembered what it was like to be alive. Then the song ended, the glitch fixed itself, and the room snapped back to the usual beat of artificial joy. Hank sniffled, wiped his face on his sleeve, and muttered something into the mic about the evils of nostalgia. The crowd exhaled, relieved to be back in the numb comfort of their own misery. And Hank, well, he picked up right where he left off, but the jokes landed a little softer, like he'd finally given in to the darkness just a little more.

Five whiskies into oblivion, slouched over a bar stool that groaned beneath the weight of his defeated soul. The bar was a graveyard of dreams and spilled spirits, dimly lit and sticky with yesterday's regrets. He mumbled something incoherent to a bartender who'd heard every variation of sorrow but pretended to listen just the same. Hank's breath reeked of cheap whisky and lost time, his eyes fixed on the half-empty glass, as if expecting it to offer some cosmic revelation—or at least the courtesy of a refill. That's when he felt it—something tugging at his left sock, a persistent little force. He glanced down, expecting maybe a rat or another stray metaphor for his life, but instead, there was a tiny kitten, no older than three weeks. Its fur was a patchwork of black and white, its eyes as wide as Hank's in the presence of a good jazz record. It clung to him like desperation, meowing with a squeak that cut through the din of the bar's low chatter and off-tune jukebox.

"Great," Hank muttered, slurring the word like he did with every promise he never kept. "A feline critic." But the kitten, unfazed by his sarcasm or the smell of his breath, dug its tiny claws deeper into his sock, asserting its claim.

"You've got the wrong guy, kid," Hank said, trying to pry the kitten off with the grace of a drunk man attempting brain surgery. The kitten, however, had other plans. It

stared up at him, eyes shining with a mix of determination and naiveté—like it had found the perfect disaster to call its own. And that disaster's name was Hank Howky. It meowed again, a sound so small yet so demanding, as if it was saying, "This is happening whether you like it or not." And for once, Hank couldn't muster the strength to argue. The kitten had him cornered, right there on his rickety stool, in that bar where the only thing more broken than the neon signs was him. He sighed, taking another swig of his whisky. "Alright, kid, but I'm not buying you kibble." The kitten just curled up around his ankle, purring softly, like it knew something Hank didn't—like it had found a warm spot in the middle of a cold world and wasn't about to give it up. And so, they sat together, the poet of the lost and a three-week-old stray, both clinging to each other in a world that had no use for either. Hank ordered another drink, because if he was going to have a revelation, he might as well be too drunk to remember it in the morning.

Within twelve hours, a new order was established at the crossroads of whiskey stains and midnight cigarette burns. Hank Howky, poet laureate of the forgotten, was now the humble servant of a three-week-old kitten with oversized paws and an ego to match. The kitten, sensing that Hank had no defense against a small creature that could fit in a whisky glass, made itself at home in his pocket of desolation. It wasn't long before Hank realized he was no longer a free agent in this world of cheap shots and shattered ambitions—he had a boss now. And its name was Bau. Yes, Bau. A nod to Baudelaire, but with fewer existential crises and more demands for belly rubs. Bau had the audacity of a seasoned barfly, already claiming Hank's body as a personal heating pad. Every time Hank tried to shift on his ratty couch or peel himself off the bar's leather stool, Bau would let out a tiny, exasperated mew, like, "Where do you think you're going, human? You serve **me** now." Hank found himself in unfamiliar territory: sober enough to notice how little cans of kitty food cost, but too broke to buy any. The poetry that once spilled from him like blood now found a new purpose—not as odes to lost dreams or bleak reflections on society's underside, but as barter. He haunted the same dives and dark alleys, reciting drunken verses in exchange for cans of salmon pâté, hoping some passerby or sympathetic bartender would spare a few

scraps. The streets became his stage again, but this time, he had a muse with a fur coat and an unforgiving appetite. “You’ve really got it made, don’t you, Bau?” Hank mumbled one evening, as he passed a can of gourmet tuna over to the kitten, who sniffed at it approvingly. Bau, lounging on Hank’s chest like a king atop his throne, flicked an ear but couldn’t be bothered to respond. It was too busy purring as Hank absent-mindedly scratched behind its ears, letting out a smoke ring that Bau batted at with lazy paws. Hank’s weed habit, once a desperate bid to numb the edges of existence, suddenly took on a new purpose. Bau, it turned out, preferred the scent of burnt herb to any store-bought catnip. Every time Hank lit up, Bau would lean in, eyes half-closed, letting out a blissed-out purr that almost sounded like contentment. If Hank got too distracted with his own spiraling thoughts, Bau would gently bat his joint-holding hand, as if to remind him to keep the incense going. A silent pact formed—Hank would get high, Bau would get cuddly, and for a moment, both of them could forget the world outside. And so they found a rhythm—Hank, rambling through back alleys in exchange for cat food, and Bau, holding court over Hank’s ragged clothes and scarred heart, while the haze of weed blurred the edges of their mismatched companionship. It wasn’t the kind of love either of them would have written about, but it was

enough to keep the darkness at bay, at least until the next sunrise brought another day's worth of trouble.

The usual odd ritual with Laura—his long-time friend with benefits, occasional muse, and accomplice in drinking binges. It was their version of "family time," an absurd scene that made perfect sense in the half-lit corners of the lowest dive bar, or in this case, the shabby motel room they'd found for the night. Laura lounged on the faded green couch, tracing circles in Bau's fur, the little stray kitten that had adopted Hank weeks back. Bau purred, half-conscious, probably lulled by the slight scent of weed that clung to Hank's clothes like a desperate memory. Laura looked like she belonged in that scene—unfazed, content, casually gorgeous in that unbothered way she had. Her foot, however, was currently perched in Hank's hand, dipped generously in a glass of absinthe. Hank, holding onto that foot with the devotion of a man who's known no other gods but his vices, let the anise-flavored green liquor drip onto his tongue as he suckled her toes. He claimed it added an extra layer to his creative process, like some twisted version of inspiration that would make the dead French poets nod in ghostly approval. With one hand, he scrawled into his battered notebook, writing a short story that might've been brilliant or entirely mad, as if there's a difference. This one was about a river flowing steadily against the graffiti-scared concrete of a forgotten jersey barrier—a place where weeds grew defiantly through the cracks, and trash

floated by like tiny parables of failure. The river in his story was thick, heavy with the stuff no one wanted anymore. It murmured about metempsychosis, the ancient cycle of souls migrating from one form to another. Maybe that dog from the 70s movie scene now inhabited Bau's little body, napping next to Laura's hip. Maybe Hank himself was just the latest vessel for the spirit of some long-dead drunk who once cursed at stars and tried to outrun the shadow of his own mind. Laura, absentmindedly scratching Bau behind the ears, glanced at Hank with a lazy smile. She knew him too well to question his peculiar methods. She didn't need to understand his ramblings about rebirth and rivers. All she needed was the familiar rhythm of his bizarre rituals and the occasional warmth of his hand brushing against hers when the nights got a little too quiet. To Hank, this was as close as he'd ever get to domestic bliss: the taste of absinthe-soaked skin, the scribble of his pen on paper, and the low hum of a cat purring against Laura's thigh. It wasn't perfect, but perfection was never the point. It was his version of family time, messy and fleeting, a little sad, but shot through with a beauty that only the invisible know how to see.

Sprawled on the floor of a city bus, back pressed against the cold metal ridges, head resting against a tattered backpack. The bus rumbled over potholes, giving him a free, low-budget massage. Clutched in his hand was a beat-up transistor radio—he'd just traded his half-drunk pint of bourbon for it with some poor soul who couldn't last another hour without the burn of cheap whiskey. Turns out, the guy's addiction ran deeper than Hank's; lucky for Hank, he still had a radio to his name, if not a buzz. The radio crackled and hissed, struggling to pick up a signal from some local jazz station. And then, out of that static wilderness, Miles Davis's horn cut through, clear as a confession at a late-night diner. It wasn't just music; it was a lifeline, something that dug into his ribs and yanked out whatever was left of his sense of wonder. The first few notes slinked out like alleyway whispers, and he felt that slow, subtle twinge between his legs. Yeah, that's right—Hank got an erection from it. Not in the way that most people get excited, but in the way only a man lying on a bus floor with a junkyard radio in his hand could. It wasn't about desire; it was about life refusing to shrivel up and give up the ghost. It was the sound of a trumpet daring the world to keep on turning, despite every reason not to. And here he was, a washed-up, boozed-out poet, getting moved to places he thought were long dead. The bus driver glanced in the rearview mirror, catching sight of

Hank stretched out like he owned the place. Probably thought Hank was crazy. Maybe he was right. But at that moment, Hank couldn't care less about the bus, or the driver, or the night draped over the city like a worn-out blanket. All that mattered was that jazz slipping through the cracks of his skull and stirring something primal, something that refused to be dulled by bourbon, bad poetry, or the weight of the world pressing down on him.

Hank stood on the edge of the platform at the rundown train station, the metal rails humming with the distant approach of the next train. His coat, frayed at the cuffs, flapped against a gust of cold wind, but he didn't mind; he'd long grown used to the cold. A barely-burning cigarette dangled from his chapped lips, the smoke curling up like ghosts dissolving into the late afternoon air. Bau, curled up inside the pocket of Hank's coat, napped blissfully, unaware of Hank's musings.

Into the approaching dusk Hank imagined Anna Karenina in all her doomed glory, throwing herself beneath the wheels. He tried to picture her face—did she look peaceful in that last moment, or was it all grim determination? It made him wonder if she regretted it halfway down, as he supposed anyone with a shred of sense might. What did she expect? That the iron beast would give her some sort of poetic release, that the tragedy would be so profound that even the gods would shed a tear? He doubted it. He figured she probably just got tired of the whole mess of life—romance, high society, Russian winters. But then, Hank wasn't much for high society. His life was more vodka shots at 3 PM and greasy cheeseburgers purchased with a crumpled ten. As he swayed slightly on the edge of the platform, he thought how Anna probably had some grand romantic notion about her end. And what did Hank have? A kitten that smelled like weed and clung to his chest at night, and a head full of half-finished poems that nobody would ever read. He'd written a whole body of work about a dog that walked through a 70s movie scene, for crying out loud. Hardly Tolstoy material. Hank took a drag of his cigarette, his mind running through some grim math. Would it hurt, or would it just feel like a sudden jolt, like waking up too fast from a nightmare? Maybe it'd be quick—just a flash, and then nothing, no more numb

mornings, no more afternoons that stretch like taffy in the sun. But he doubted it. He figured it'd be ugly, like everything else. The train was closer now, the rumble sending vibrations up through the soles of his worn boots. He let his eyes follow the rusted rails out to where they vanished into the haze of the city. Anna Karenina had a book to preserve her tragedy, a grand novel with a noble title. All Hank had was a police report, a smear on the tracks, and maybe some drunk conductor grumbling to himself about delays. Bau stirred in his pocket, letting out a tiny, disoriented mewl. Hank looked down at the bump of the little furball.

“Not now, Bau,” he muttered.

The kitten responded with a small yawn, its pink tongue poking out. Hank couldn't help but smirk a little—life's mess and all, and there was this scruffy cat who still thought his chest was the warmest place on earth. Bau's warmth seeped through the fabric, into Hank's chest, like a tiny reminder that not everything was entirely awful. The train barreled into view, headlights piercing the gloom. The brakes screeched like a jazz solo gone wrong, and Hank teetered a bit closer to the edge. But just as quickly, he took a step back, a sigh escaping through the curl of smoke. He wasn't ready for his own Anna Karenina moment—not yet. There were still a few more bars to haunt, a few more lousy poems to scribble on bar napkins,

and a kitten to keep fed, even if it meant pawning off his dignity in exchange for a can of cheap cat food. The train slowed to a stop in front of him, the doors opening with a hiss. A couple of tired commuters shuffled out, giving him a passing glance. Hank flicked his cigarette onto the tracks, then took a step back onto the platform, feeling the solid ground under his feet, the weight of Bau's tiny body against his ribs. He muttered under his breath, "Guess Tolstoy will have to wait," and wandered off into the twilight, looking for the next dive bar where he might trade a poem for a drink.

Bau, curled up at his feet, under the bar, unfazed by the clamor around them. But out there, beyond the thick, yellowing windows of this forgotten watering hole, something curious is happening. A blurry video taken on a phone in the back of a dingy comedy club makes its way to YouTube. The footage captures Hank, swaying slightly on stage, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his gravelly voice cutting through the haze as he delivers bleakly humorous truths about life, about the pointless grind, about love that turns sour, and the ever-elusive meaning of it all. His words hit like a punch to the gut, raw, unfiltered, brutally honest. They resonate with people who feel trapped in their own empty routines, with the lost souls who haunt the internet late at night. The video goes viral, quietly, without the gloss of corporate hype. Someone from that same crowd—maybe a grad student looking for the next “raw, authentic voice” or just a wandering soul with an appreciation for a sad poet—stumbles upon a tattered copy of Hank’s poetry, left behind on a sticky bar table. They find the verses scrawled on napkins, matchbook covers, and receipts. They gather these pieces, creating a dossier of fragmented thoughts about stray dogs, jazz notes lost in time, and how despair tastes like cheap whiskey. The words, meandering and unpolished, somehow feel more genuine than the carefully constructed poetry of the literary scene. They

share the writings online, and soon, whispers of Howky's work begin to circulate in academic circles, literary journals, and smoky backroom discussions. Before long, Hank's prose and poems are analyzed as "profound meditations on existential emptiness," and literary critics praise his "uncompromising depiction of life's futility." In universities, professors assign his works in classes about contemporary poetry, his lines dissected by students who haven't a clue that their reluctant idol is sleeping off a hangover on the other side of town. Articles appear, analyzing his "dark humor" and "stark insights" into the human condition. Conferences host panels discussing the influence of Howky's "vagabond philosophy." He's hailed as a modern-day Bukowski, a voice for the disenfranchised, the invisible. And yet, Hank remains oblivious to all of it. He's too busy slipping into the arms of his old friend, intoxication, too preoccupied with the quiet rituals of despair to notice that his voice is echoing through a world he no longer feels part of. He still writes his words on the back of bar napkins, reads them to Bau in the dead of night, and laughs at his own jokes with the bartender who pretends to listen. If Hank knew, he'd probably chuckle at the absurdity of it all—at the irony that while he's fading away in the corners of his own mind, the world has started to care. But for now, he's just a poet at the end of the bar, a man who hasn't checked his

phone in years, unaware that his words have found a life of their own.

He never quite understood how the tides had shifted. His stand-up gigs—once delivered to a half-drunk bartender and maybe one guy who wandered in by mistake—had become the stuff of legend. In dingy clubs where broken stools outnumbered sober patrons, he'd started to gather a following. Not that he noticed, of course. The truth was, if Hank Howky actually scheduled a show, it would have been a sold-out affair with a line stretching around the block, made up of poetry professors, hipsters trying to look indifferent, and the occasional bewildered fan who couldn't quite figure out why they were there. But Hank's life had never been about structure or planning. He wandered into clubs like a lost breeze, clutching his crumpled notebook, reeking of whisky, and stumbling on stage whenever the universe nudged him in that direction. Hank didn't even know the name of half the joints he performed in. To him, they all looked the same—peeling wallpaper, neon signs flickering out like broken promises, and bartenders who'd heard more confessions than any priest. He'd stagger in, make eye contact with a microphone stand, and take it as a personal challenge.

“Let me tell you about my day,” he'd start, swaying slightly, the audience unsure if he was about to collapse or deliver a punchline. “Or maybe you don't care... in which case, you're in the right place.” And somehow,

from that unstable stance and mumbling demeanor, he'd unravel a stream of bitterly hilarious truths about the state of the world, the emptiness of ambition, and how Bau the cat has better taste than most people he's met. People would hear whispers about these performances: "I saw Howky last night at Sully's, or was it The Rusty Nail?" "No, man, he was at that basement club with no sign out front." And so they searched for him, hoping to catch a moment of his brutal, existential monologues. But Hank? He never bothered with the audience count. If three people were present, or thirty, or a hundred, he treated them all the same: a blur in his hazy, whiskey-soaked nights. And the myth grew. There was no Instagram handle, no YouTube live streams. Just word of mouth and rumors, stories swapped over cigarettes and beers. Someone even suggested that finding Hank was like finding a rare jazz club—if you got in, you didn't just see a performance, you witnessed a moment. But Hank never thought of it that way. He'd stagger off stage the same way he came, with a muttered thanks, and disappear into the shadows before anyone could try and figure out where he'd go next. He was the ghost of stand-up, haunting the stages he chose, never lingering long enough for the spotlight to burn him. The crowd would linger behind after his set, drinking up the words he left like they'd never heard anything quite like it. Then they'd go home,

sharing their experience like they'd seen Bigfoot, while Hank Howky, oblivious to the buzz, wandered off to find his next drink or a quiet corner to write another verse about a stray dog, a broken jukebox, or the lingering scent of his last cigarette.

It's a place so dark and desolate that even the roaches look depressed. It's here that our two literary genius hunters, Ivy and Saul—professors of comparative literature, pipe-smoking connoisseurs of dead authors—stumble upon the legendary and elusive Hank Howky. They've been on the trail for years, scouring the underbelly of America in search of the poet of the lost and broken, following rumors from truck stops and hitchhikers. They hear of a dive bar so low that not even Bukowski would touch it, so they know they must be close. And there he is, right where he belongs—Hank Howky, slumped in a corner booth, tangled up in a lip-lock with a dog-eared picture of Walt Whitman that looks like it was cut out from some forgotten poetry anthology decades ago. Howky's arms are wrapped around the frame like it's his one true love. The photo's edges are stained with whiskey tears, and he's mumbling something about "leaves of grass" that's either a homage or a complaint about the weed that got him kicked out of the last bar. Ivy nudges Saul, who almost chokes on his artisanal pipe tobacco, and they creep closer, unable to believe their luck.

Ivy whispers, "Is he—making out with Whitman?"

"Shh, don't scare him off," Saul replies, as if they've found a rare species of owl instead of a degenerate with poetic tendencies.

As if hearing them, Hank suddenly snaps to attention, pushing the picture aside. He squints at the literary duo like they're blurry mirages, then croaks out, "You got beer mats?" His breath smells like despair mixed with cheap bourbon, and the scholars eagerly shove a pile of soggy beer mats toward him like he's about to summon the muses. Hank pulls out a pen that he probably stole from a loan office, and his hand—steady for the first time in decades—flies over the beer mats. Words spill out, phrases that make Ivy's heart stutter and Saul's monocle fog up. It's a masterpiece, a piece of wordsmithery so raw and brutal that it could make a Nobel committee chair burst into tears and hand over two prizes without a second thought. He's writing about life, death, and that one time he got kicked by a mule behind a liquor store, and somehow it all ties together into something transcendent. And then, just as suddenly as it began, it ends. Hank throws down the pen, grabs a quarter-full bottle of bourbon, and chugs it like he's dying of thirst—only the thirst is existential. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, looks up at the two literary hunters as if to say, "You fools, this is all you'll ever get," and then collapses face-first onto the sticky bar floor. Ivy and Saul stare at the beer mats, still damp with spilled whiskey and sweat. They cradle them like sacred relics, their hands shaking. The poem is indecipherable at first glance, a

chaotic scrawl that somehow rearranges itself into genius upon the third or fourth reading. They lean down to check on Howky, but he's out cold, murmuring something about "transcendence" and "cheap cigarettes." In the end, they leave with the beer mats, destined for fame as the discoverers of Howky's lost masterpiece. And Hank? Well, he remains sprawled out on the floor of that dive bar, where he belongs, dreaming of Whitman and bad bourbon.

Pussy Tasting Night. As far as Hank was concerned, it was a conceptual event—like a wine tasting but with the intrigue of intimacy and the desperate charm of a poet who'd long abandoned all sense of societal decorum. He gathered a few of his friends—ladies of the night who'd grown fond of Hank's unfiltered takes on life and who'd laugh at his jokes, even when they stung. They joined him in his shabby motel room, lit by a flickering neon light that buzzed like an ancient fly. A faint jazz melody, courtesy of a beaten-up radio, filled the air as Hank laid out a pad and pen. He gave a theatrical sniff, like a seasoned sommelier, as he cracked his knuckles, ready to take notes. Each "tasting" was treated with the same level of seriousness a wine connoisseur might reserve for a fine bottle of Bordeaux. He described one as having a "robust, earthy flavor, with a hint of regret and Marlboro Reds," while another was "silky smooth, with notes of lavender, desperation, and a lingering bitterness that pairs surprisingly well with cheap whiskey." He scribbled down adjectives like "smoky aftertaste" and "top notes of despair," marking a few down as "ideal for pairing with jazz records at 3 AM." His subjects laughed, amused by his poetic nonsense and the absurdity of it all. Hank, in turn, turned their evening into a symphony of wordplay, turning the most carnal of acts into some twisted, highbrow art critique. But somewhere in the middle of it,

as he sipped his bourbon and pretended to be the world's first erotic sommelier, Hank's gaze grew distant, and his notes, once playful, became almost tender. Maybe the tasting notes weren't about them at all, but about the life he'd found himself wading through like a swamp of broken dreams. The night ended as the sun began to rise, casting a soft glow through the stained curtains. Hank's guests left, laughing and shaking their heads at the ridiculousness of it all. He was left alone with his notes, pages upon pages of scribbles and stains, and a reminder that even in his most ridiculous escapades, the poetry of his life would always seep through the cracks.

What started as a local rumor—"You ever hear of Howky? I think he wrote that poem about the stray dog in the '70s movie..."—spiraled into a full-blown cultural phenomenon. Unbeknownst to Howky, his dark, sardonic musings on life and the occasional half-lucid ramblings on YouTube had captured a cult following. But the thing about Howky is that he never stays put, drifting like a feather in a whiskey-scented breeze. So began the hunt. Think "Finding Nemo," but swap the ocean for a sea of stale beer and regret. A ragtag team of his accidental fans, ranging from a university professor who teaches "Howky's Nihilism" to a stoner who got addicted to his ramblings at 3 AM, join forces. They track rumors like fishermen tracing the migration of an elusive fish. Was he seen in a bar in New Orleans, scribbling poetry on a napkin? Or was he muttering to himself in an alleyway in Detroit? Each tip sends them further down the rabbit hole of forgotten diners and motels that only accept cash and never ask questions. But just as they get close, Howky slips through their grasp, leaving only a whiff of cheap cologne and a handwritten note about the futility of existence. With every dead end, the quest becomes more intense, like "The Hunt for Red October," only the submarine is Hank's depressed soul, and the sonar is a series of dive bars that stretch across the country. They realize Howky has become a ghost, a specter who dances

just beyond the reach of their outstretched hands. By now, the team has grown—journalists hoping to capture an exclusive, grad students trying to understand why he's become a cultural enigma, and a few lost souls who relate a little too much to his work. They pore over clues with the intensity of cold war cryptographers, reading between the lines of his old poetry, analyzing his spoken-word rants for hints of his location. Their search grows desperate as if they're tracking a living myth. Each city that could hold Howky becomes their battleground—a library he might have slept in, a barstool with his name carved in. The clues point to impossible places: a beach he mentioned once that could be on any coast, or a diner with “the best pie, but only if you’re drunk enough.” They spend sleepless nights deciphering Howky’s ramblings as if trying to decode a map of his psyche, only to realize he might just be screwing with them. At this point, the search transforms into something almost religious, like a twisted, booze-soaked version of the quest for the Holy Grail. Finding Howky isn't just about finding a man—it's about discovering the elusive meaning in his words, the kernel of truth behind his ramblings. The team, now more a cult than a search party, starts treating Howky like a prophet who might have unlocked the secrets of life’s pointlessness. They whisper his sayings, form theories about why he drinks bourbon on Tuesdays, and debate

whether his last known napkin poem, "The End is Nigh, or Just Another Tuesday," suggests a specific location or is just another drunken epiphany. Meanwhile, Howky, completely oblivious, stumbles through life, somehow always a step ahead of his own legend. He writes a few more poems about a stray cat he named Bau and a forgotten bar that had the "best damn jukebox" before it burned down in the '80s. He scribbles a poem in a motel room that'll never be cleaned. As the searchers draw nearer, he feels a shiver of something—paranoia, or maybe just the chill of a bottle of gin. One night, they nearly catch him. Howky's perched on a barstool, cradling a whiskey, waxing poetic about the concept of ennui to a bartender who stopped listening hours ago. The team bursts in, sweaty and disheveled, looking like the survivors of an emotional shipwreck. They shout his name, spilling over themselves with excitement—finally, they've found him.

Howky glances up, takes one look at the crowd that has built him into an unwilling legend, and says, "Sorry, wrong guy."

He slips out the back, vanishing into the night, leaving behind a scrawled note on the bar: "The meaning is in the looking, not the finding. Cheers." The team is left standing there, with more questions than answers, holding onto the half-drunk whiskey bottle he left behind

like it's the last piece of the true cross. They realize, like everyone before them, that the search was always the point, not the poet they could never quite catch.

Hunched over his typewriter in the corner of a dimly lit motel room, chain-smoking his way through the final pages of his magnum opus: "Sleeper No. 21, Recherche". A 500-page dive into the life, or rather the inanimate existence, of a single rail track sleeper. The piece was a wild ramble, half-poetry, half-rant about the sleeper's pointless endurance under trains that never noticed it, under weight it never asked for—just like Hank's own life. Hank was on page 487. The motel room reeked of stale beer, the kind that was half off at the bar across the street because it was about to turn. His latest muse was the metaphorical weight pressing down on his protagonist, that poor sleeper that could crack any day now. His fingers pounded the keys like they had something to prove. Then, she walked in—or, at least, he noticed her. She wasn't *in* the motel room exactly; she was in the parking lot, standing there like a mirage with a cigarette between her fingers and an expression that screamed "Greta Garbo on a hangover." The harsh light from the neon sign outside caught her just right, making her look like a black-and-white movie star who'd stumbled through time, only to land in a dump like this. Her hair was tousled, like she'd either just rolled out of bed or hadn't seen one in days. Her clothes were wrinkled, and her lips painted the color of fading jazz. Hank stopped mid-sentence, the word "ballast" still dangling half-

formed on the paper. For a moment, he wondered if he'd finally gone off the deep end, if the sleeper had finally crushed him, and this Greta Garbo apparition was his brain's last attempt at poetry before it shut down completely. But no, she was real—leaning against a car that was way too nice for this parking lot, staring blankly into the distance like she had already seen everything and nothing at all. Hank's eyes drifted to his manuscript, a hot mess of existential drivel and nicotine stains, and he thought, "To hell with it." The sleeper could wait. It wasn't going anywhere, after all. He stubbed out his cigarette, slapped a worn-out fedora on his head, and made his way out into the night, sidling up to her with his signature brand of reckless, slightly slurred charm.

"Hey, sweetheart, you look like a star that forgot how to shine. Wanna make a little magic with a poet who's three scotches past sober?"

She turned her head slowly, sizing him up, probably wondering if he was just another ghost from a dream she couldn't quite remember. Then she smirked—like she knew better, but maybe not enough to care.

"Got a cigarette?" she asked.

"Only if you promise not to ask why it's half-smoked already."

She took it, and they shared a silence that was as loaded as the trains that rolled over Sleeper No. 21. Hank figured

the rail track and his manuscript could wait a little longer. Some things, like poetry and reckless impulses, were meant to be lived first, written later—if you survived them. He didn't know if he'd survive this one, but what was life if not one more story to chase after in the haze? He didn't even remember stumbling back into his motel room with her, but the night was a blur of heat, desperation, and the sort of drunken rhythm that feels like music only until it doesn't. He fucked her like a man trying to prove something, and then he made love to her like he'd forgotten what that meant. Somewhere between the sheets, he found a moment of tenderness—holding her face, tracing the lines of weariness under her eyes, like reading a poem in a language he barely understood. But tenderness doesn't last long in a place like this, and neither did they. He took her again, with the kind of urgency that made the walls rattle. It was raw, careless, and exactly what both of them needed, even if neither would admit it. They passed out tangled together, two strangers wrapped up in each other like crumpled receipts from bars long closed. He dreamt of Sleeper No. 21 cracking under the weight of a train, and when he woke up, it was to the smell of cheap coffee and the clatter of eggs on a plastic plate. She was sitting at the edge of the bed, hair still messy, but with a sly smirk that dared him to make something of it. "Breakfast is on me," she said,

handing him a greasy paper bag from the diner down the road. “Thought you might need something to soak up the whisky.” Hank blinked against the morning light slicing through the dingy blinds, feeling the throbbing in his skull and the rough scratch of the sheets. He stared at her, then at the lukewarm coffee, and realized it had been a long time since anyone had given him anything without expecting something in return.

“Why?” he asked, feeling his voice crack like his manuscript’s tired metaphor.

She shrugged, lighting a cigarette from his pack. “Because you looked like you could use a break.”

And just like that, she was gone—leaving him with his cold breakfast. When she was gone, also was the manuscript.

Somewhere in a dusty, forgotten bookstore wedged between a laundromat and a pawnshop, a lone copy of *Sleeper No. 21, Recherche* found itself in the hands of a grad student. The place was a paradise for the unpublishable and overlooked—books that nobody had bothered to ban, but nobody had bothered to read, either. The grad student, who had a thing for obscure titles and the smell of paper that had soaked up decades of cigarette smoke, flipped through the pages. They had no idea who Hank Howky was, but the erratic, rambling prose caught their eye. It was like reading the unfiltered thoughts of a man who had seen the bottom of every bottle and decided to keep falling. They bought it for a dollar, right along with a few others, figuring it would make for a good thesis or, at the very least, a curiosity to brag about. They posted a few excerpts online—snippets about the sleeper, about carrying weight you never asked for, about finding beauty in the dust and the grind. Within weeks, literary circles were buzzing. Critics found it “the most profound expression of 21st-century disillusionment.” The comparisons started rolling in—people called it the *À la recherche du temps perdu* of the modern era, with Howky's rail track sleeper standing in for all of the silent, unnoticed struggles of existence. Publishers and journalists went wild trying to track down Howky, but he was nowhere to be found. They found an

old address leading to a condemned building, a few unpaid bar tabs, and rumors of a wild-haired guy spouting poetry in dive bars.

Meanwhile, Hank Howky was sprawled across a stained couch in some other forgotten motel room, playing with Bau, who batted at the end of his scarf with kitten-like intensity. The room smelled like weed and cheap booze, with jazz playing faintly from a beat-up radio. He had no memory of *Sleeper No. 21*—to him, it was just another fevered, late-night ramble, lost to time and intoxication. The manuscript itself was something he vaguely recalled tossing in the trash or handing off to some girl who looked like Lauren Bacall after one too many rounds of bourbon. As far as Hank was concerned, the real story was here—Bau pawing at his fingers, the sun streaming through the cracked blinds, and the warm numbness in his veins that kept the darkness at bay. If the world out there had decided he was a genius, well, that was their problem. All Hank knew was that the monster was quieter today, and that was enough.

Hanky didn't like it one bit when people began noticing him. He'd been used to slipping through life like smoke in an alley, undetected, unimportant, the kind of guy you might remember only as a shadow that briefly blocked the neon bar sign. But lately, things were off. It started with a guy at the bar—one of those young types who seemed like they might have careers and families. This kid stared too long, bought Hank a whiskey, and started asking about poetry. Hank, as usual, half-listened, just enough to keep the free drink coming. But then he asked, "Are you... Hank Howky?" and Hank nearly choked on the stale peanuts he'd been chewing on.

"No, no, not me," he replied, waving his hand dismissively, adopting his best dead-eyed stare. "You got the wrong guy, pal. Name's Charlie. Charlie... uh, Figgins."

Charlie Figgins. Really? Even Hank couldn't believe he'd spat out something so dumb. But it worked, the kid looked puzzled, muttered an apology, and left. Except after that, it kept happening. A stranger at the laundromat, a wiry woman with glasses, caught him between the dryers, scrutinizing him like he was a rare insect. A young couple in a thrift store—clearly not from around this part of town—whispered and pointed. One brave soul even knocked on the door of his shabby motel room, but Hank just cracked it open and said he was

renting the place for a guy named “Randy McCorkle” and hadn’t seen him in days. Soon, Hank stopped giving his real name altogether. To the regulars at his favorite dive, he became “Lenny Jones.” To the folks who lurked near the bus stop, he was “Earl Jackson.” On particularly ambitious days, he claimed to be “Reggie Van Hoosen.” He cycled through the names, each as forgettable as he hoped to be. He took to avoiding eye contact, pulling the brim of his cap low, as if it might hide him better than the hangover he wore like a second skin. But despite the false names and half-hearted deflections, the questions didn’t stop. There were rumors of some writer, some mysterious voice of the downtrodden and damned, gaining traction on social media. Folks spoke in hushed tones about a “cult classic in the making,” a “modern beat poet of despair.” Hank tried to ignore it all, but even Bau, his kitten, looked up at him like he was holding back some crucial truth. By then, he’d convinced himself the people showing up weren’t real fans or curious readers—they had to be debt collectors, maybe an old warrant finally catching up to him. Because why else would anyone care about him, of all people?

If a place starts feeling too close, too known, it's time to leave. And lately, that city was making him itch. They'd been looking for him. Why? Maybe it was his tab at O'Malley's, maybe it was something about that landlord he'd screamed poetry at, or maybe it was worse—people wanting to know him, to "understand" him. Even a rumor about some academic looking for him had reached the bar. The air in that city had grown too thick, each breath clawing its way into his lungs like the tendrils of a vine. It was time to go. He scooped up Bau, who was curled up in a cardboard box by the mattress. The kitten opened one eye, unimpressed by Hank's grand escape plan but too cozy to resist being carried. Hank tucked Bau into the inside pocket of his coat, the little feline's head poking out, blinking at the world. "Sorry, kid, but they don't get to know me. They don't get to know us," Hank muttered, even if Bau didn't give a damn about the human's melodramatic whispers. He stumbled down the stairs of the crumbling motel, the flickering neon light casting shadows that looked like the ghosts of all the broken nights he'd spent there. He didn't bother with the check-out—he'd left his goodbye in the form of an empty bottle of bourbon on the receptionist's desk. With a last look at the city lights shimmering like false promises, he turned his back on the skyline and walked. The highway was about a mile out of town. The walk felt longer, with each

step dragging him away from the only routine he'd known. Bau wriggled in the pocket, occasionally batting at the loose threads of Hank's coat. "Relax, kid, we'll find some trucker with a soft spot for strays. They always have a soft spot," he muttered as they reached the edge of the road. He stuck out his thumb, barely putting any effort into it, like he didn't actually care if anyone stopped. And yet, a rusty old pickup truck slowed to a crawl beside him. The driver, a middle-aged woman with cigarette burns on her dashboard and the look of someone who'd seen everything, rolled down the window.

"You look like trouble, and that's exactly what I need right now. Where you headed?" she asked, her voice roughened by years of smoke.

Hank shrugged, staring out past the highway, past the dull landscape stretching in all directions. "Anywhere but here," he replied.

She glanced at Bau peeking from the pocket and smirked. "Good enough. Hop in."

And just like that, he was gone. Leaving behind the city that had somehow turned against him, a city where the air had become so stifling that even his whiskey couldn't cut through it anymore. The road stretched out like a black ribbon under the moonlight, and the hum of the truck engine became a lullaby. Hank leaned his head against the window, and for a second, he thought he

heard Bau purr, as if maybe the cat understood what freedom tasted like too. Where they'd end up? Didn't matter. As long as the road stayed open and the city stayed behind. She turned out to be surprisingly good company, better than the ghosts he'd been drinking with lately. Her name was Rita, but she laughed when she said it, like she couldn't believe it herself. She had stories—tales about growing up in a town even smaller than the one they were speeding away from, about truck stops where the coffee was strong enough to bring a dead man back, and a teenage son she hadn't seen in years. Hank found himself laughing, actually laughing, as she described her first arrest for trespassing in a Walmart at 3 a.m. "Just wanted to see if those garden gnomes would make good company. Turns out they don't, and security doesn't appreciate it." The laugh came from somewhere deep, the kind that felt alien after all those years of bitterness clogging his throat. As the miles stretched on, the truck grew warmer, cozier, and the world outside turned into a blur of headlights and shadows. Hank couldn't quite remember the last time someone had shared this kind of unfiltered mess of a story with him—no agenda, no pretension, just two broken people with nowhere to go. Bau dozed off in his pocket, purring softly, unaware of whatever human drama was unfolding. They pulled over by a nameless motel in the middle of

nowhere—one of those places where the neon sign only had two letters still lit. Rita parked the truck and turned to Hank. “Guess I could use a rest. Been a while since I talked to anyone who wasn’t just trying to buy a smoke off me.” He nodded. “Yeah, rest sounds good.” She looked at him, a little too long, with a kind of hunger and sadness mixed together, like maybe she’d been waiting for any excuse to be close to someone again. Hank knew that look. He’d seen it in the mirror a few times, back when he still cared to look in mirrors. Maybe it was the cheap whiskey or just the weight of all those stories, but he reached out, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. They stumbled into the motel room together. It wasn’t romantic. It wasn’t pretty. It was just human—two bodies clinging together against the cold of an empty night, their lips tasting like cheap bourbon and loneliness. The creaky bed barely held up, groaning in time with their bodies, but they didn’t care. It was desperate, messy, and over too fast, leaving only the stale air and their mingled breath in the dim light of the neon flickering through the window. When it was done, they lay there in the silence. Hank stared at the cracked ceiling, wondering if Bau was somewhere in the coat pocket still sleeping through all this. Rita lit a cigarette, offering him one, and they smoked together in wordless understanding. He didn’t love her. He didn’t even know her, not really. But

for a moment, she was warm, and he was warm, and the night didn't seem so empty. He felt a pang of pity, not just for her, but for himself, too—for both of them, really, caught in this absurd little dance against the universe. And then he let it go, like he always did, watching the smoke drift up to the ceiling until there was nothing left to hold onto.

Hank and Bau had been on the road for... well, for an amount of time that had blurred into the endless desert horizon. He had stopped trying to keep track somewhere between Albuquerque and a half-finished bottle of gin. Bau, his loyal stray companion, proved to be a better asset than any hitchhiking sign. The little furball's wide-eyed, innocent charm worked wonders; even the most hardened diner owners softened, slipping Hank a free slice of pie or an extra cup of coffee, all while Bau sat like a dignified prince in his lap. In small towns with names too forgettable to write down, Bau's charm had managed to score free nights at motels so cheap that the bedbugs paid rent. The staff, often old ladies with soft spots for vagabond poets and cats, would coo at Bau as they slid Hank a room key, whispering about how cold it was getting at night. He'd smile, a little crookedly, and let them think that maybe, just maybe, he was just a lost soul in need of saving. Now, here he was, parked at John Ford's Point in the Monument Valley, as a snowstorm swept through like an angry director determined to reshoot the last act. Flakes swirled around him, erasing the red rock landscape, covering the iconic buttes in a shroud of white. Hank squinted through the haze, thinking about the long-forgotten westerns that brought his father to tears, where men like John Wayne spoke in gravely drawls, making the frontier seem like a place

where things made sense. Bau curled up inside Hank's jacket, purring softly, unbothered by the biting cold or the existential musings of his human. Hank pulled his coat tighter, muttering to himself through chattering teeth, his breath fogging up the frigid air. It felt like waiting for Godot, but with a cowboy twist. Waiting for John Wayne, or maybe just any kind of sign that the universe wasn't some cosmic practical joke, played out on an endless reel in a theater where the popcorn always tastes stale. The snow kept falling, blurring everything until the world looked like an old black-and-white Western. Hank scanned the horizon, half-expecting to see a lone horseman materialize through the curtain of white, spitting dust and offering sage wisdom. But, of course, the landscape stayed empty. No John Wayne. No heroic figure. Just Hank, Bau, and the endless expanse of desert disguised in snow.

He lit a cigarette with fingers stiff from cold, savoring the bitter warmth that filled his lungs, and exhaled a cloud of smoke into the swirling blizzard. "Alright, Duke," he muttered into the void. "Any time now. I'm here, you're late, and I'm freezing my ass off."

Bau lifted its head briefly, as if in agreement, then burrowed back into the warmth of Hank's chest. And Hank, well, he waited. Because if life was just a cruel joke, at least it had good cinematography. The snowstorm

eventually forced Hank and Bau into the half-shelter of Goulding's Lodge, a place built for tourists looking for the grandeur of Monument Valley without actually wanting to feel the cold of the open desert. Goulding's had once been a place for star-struck Western fans, but now it had the weathered feel of a museum piece, where the glory days of John Ford and old cowboy legends gathered dust on the shelves. Hank wandered in with Bau tucked under his arm, the kitten's head poking out just enough to peer at the front desk with those big, persuasive eyes. The clerk, a man who looked like he was built out of sandstone himself, sized up the scruffy poet and his feline sidekick. He leaned on the counter, glancing down at Bau, who gave him a slow blink. A crack of a smile cut through his desert-dried face.

"Got a backroom with a mattress. You keep the cat quiet, and we'll forget about payment."

Bau's charm pulled through once more. Hank nodded with a smile, the kind that only reaches halfway, and they followed the clerk down the hall to a room that had probably seen more ghosts of road-weary travelers than paying guests. The mattress was lumpy and smelled faintly of dust and the desert night, but it was warm and out of the wind, which was more than Hank had hoped for. As they settled in, the clerk reappeared with a chipped bowl of Navajo soup—thick, rich, steaming with

the kind of spices that felt like a fire in the chest. He gave Hank a knowing look and dropped a small bundle of dried peyote buttons into his hand. “For the visions,” the clerk murmured, his voice a low rumble.

“You look like a man who could use a little clarity, or at least a good story.”

Later, after the soup’s warmth faded, Hank found himself cross-legged on the creaky mattress, Bau purring softly against his thigh. He chewed the peyote slowly, feeling the bitter plant dissolve on his tongue, each swallow a small surrender to the chaos of whatever might come next. The desert outside was quiet now, the storm’s howls replaced by a silence so deep it felt like it could swallow the whole world. Soon, the shadows in the room began to dance, shifting in time with the flickering light from a cracked lantern. Hank leaned back, letting the visions roll over him like desert waves. He saw Monument Valley as it once was—a sea of ancient sand and bones, where red rock giants walked and shadows stretched forever. He saw John Wayne, or maybe just the ghost of a man who thought he was John Wayne, sitting by the window with his hat tipped low, rolling a cigarette with hands as weathered as the land.

“About time you showed up,” Hank slurred to the silhouette, his voice melting into the hum of the peyote trip.

The figure turned, offering a slow nod like they shared some unspoken understanding. And for a moment, Hank thought he might have found the meaning hidden between the desert stars, buried under the windblown dunes. But then Bau nudged his cheek with a damp nose, pulling him back just enough to remind him that the only certainty was the warmth of a purring body pressed close against the cold. They lay there, tangled together on that worn-out mattress, while the spirits of the land twisted around them, and Hank swore he heard the distant echo of a harmonica playing a song he couldn't quite place. It was a tune that drifted out into the endless desert night, carrying the stories of all the lost souls who had passed through before them, who had sought meaning, or just a place to hide. And Hank, well, he figured he'd stay in that in-between space a little longer—just him, Bau, the ghosts of cowboys, and the feeling that maybe, just maybe, he'd finally caught a glimpse of what he'd been running from all this time.

From one shabby town to the next, hitchhiking across cracked highways, sleeping in motels with broken neon signs, and drinking whatever swill he could scavenge from small-town bars. To the locals, he was just another dusty, nameless drifter. But to Hank, this aimless wandering was a way to stay under the radar, to avoid whatever might be looking for him—or so he thought. Yet, despite the late-night drinks, the midnight strolls through empty streets, and the hollow laughs shared with strangers over stories no one cared about, Hank couldn't shake off the feeling that someone, or something, was trailing him. It wasn't paranoia; he knew what that felt like. This was different. It was like a low hum in the back of his mind, the constant sensation of unseen eyes studying his every move. Hank would occasionally catch glimpses out of the corner of his eye—a shadow moving where none should, a figure that disappeared when he turned to look. He'd brush it off, muttering to himself between sips of whiskey, "Maybe it's just the booze making friends with my head." But the feeling persisted. In Kansas, a kindly bartender slipped him a free beer and asked if he was "the guy from the videos." Hank blinked at her, uncomprehending, and gave a dismissive shrug. Videos? He couldn't remember anyone pointing a camera at him since the time he yelled at a pigeon in downtown Chicago. But the bartender just smiled knowingly, as if she had let him in on some inside

joke. In Oklahoma, a grizzled trucker gave him a ride, mumbling something about Hank's "brave words" while smoking a hand-rolled cigarette. He even offered Hank a wad of cash—"For a real poet like you, brother." Hank, being Hank, pocketed the cash without question, but the comment itched at him. What words? What bravery? As far as he was concerned, he just talked nonsense into the night, into the faces of folks too drunk to care. One evening in New Mexico, with the desert wind howling like a lost soul, Hank woke up in a cheap motel room to find a note slipped under his door. It was written in a delicate hand, almost too refined for the paper it clung to. It read: "We know where to find you, Hank Howky." He laughed it off, crumpling the note, thinking it was a prank from some overly enthusiastic barfly. But for the next few weeks, he couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. He'd look over his shoulder at every stop, half-expecting to see someone lurking in the shadows, but the presence was always intangible, like a whisper carried away on the wind. He crossed state lines, lost and restless, the world blurring into a series of faceless diners and gas stations. But the feeling followed him, nagging at him like a hangover he couldn't sleep off. Bau, the scrappy kitten, would look over Hank's shoulder sometimes, staring at something only he could see. Hank would just pat the cat and laugh nervously, "Don't tell me you're in on this too,

Bau." One night, somewhere near the border of Nevada, Hank sat alone in a bar that smelled of regret and stale beer. A stranger approached him, slipping him an envelope with no words. Inside was a printout of an article: *"Sleeper No. 21: The Underground Masterpiece of Hank Howky."* The article spoke of the raw, unfiltered truths, the haunting humor, and the melancholy wrapped in Hank's prose. It cited excerpts from a book Hank could barely remember writing, let alone finishing. Hank's hands shook as he read, the words slipping through his mind like water through a sieve. He looked up at the stranger, but he had already vanished into the smoky haze. Hank stumbled outside, heart pounding. In that moment, he realized that it wasn't just ghosts or shadows trailing him—it was the world catching up to his myth, even as he tried to outrun himself. And somewhere in the night, beyond the flickering motel lights, he thought he heard a whisper: "You can't hide forever, Hank." Hank, feeling the weight of his own myth pressing against him, decided he needed to disappear in a way that no one could trace. He hitchhiked his way to the nearest harbor, a place where the smell of salt and diesel hung thick in the air, mingling with the cries of seagulls and the clamor of cranes. He stumbled upon a cargo ship flying the Liberian flag—one of those rusted beasts that never asked questions as long as cash changed hands. Hank traded the

last of his wadded-up bills to a surly crewman, who didn't bother asking why he wanted to board. The ship's name, barely readable through layers of chipped paint, promised a trip that would erase him: "Viento Perdido". Lost Wind. It seemed fitting. As the ship groaned into motion, Hank stood at the rail, staring back at the dwindling lights of the harbor. He clutched Bau close as the kitten nuzzled into his worn jacket. He didn't care about the exact destination—somewhere in South America, somewhere far enough to shed whatever was trailing him. Somewhere he could be a nameless face again. He breathed in the sea air, feeling a strange mix of hope and dread churn inside him, like the waves below. As the ship groaned to life and cut through the black waves, Hank stood by the railing, watching the dim lights of the harbor shrink to fireflies against the horizon. He clutched Bau, his scrappy kitten, who seemed to find his own peculiar joy in the rolling sway of the ship. While Hank occasionally battled nausea after one too many drinks, Bau thrived. The little cat would bat at the sea spray and purr against the wind, seemingly delighted with every wave, every rumble of the engine. It wasn't sea sickness Bau felt—it was sea happiness, a kind of kitten euphoria that made Hank almost envious. Days turned into a blur of ocean blues and shifting skies, until the ship finally creaked into the port of Santos, Brazil.

The moment Hank set foot on the sun-baked dock, the heat hit him like a wave of molten air. The humidity clung to his skin, as if the air itself refused to let him go. Bau, unbothered as usual, sniffed the new scents of the port, his fur bristling with curiosity. Santos sprawled out before them, a tangle of heat and unfamiliar faces. Hank couldn't escape the glances of local women—sultry, poised, their eyes like dark mirrors. They were beautiful, sure, but something about them rubbed Hank the wrong way. They flirted with the charm of practiced professionals, but the conversation always circled back to money. They seemed to size him up like a market purchase, weighing his worth against his empty pockets. For Hank, it was a bitter reminder that he hadn't left all the ghosts behind. But he pressed forward, wandering deeper into the labyrinth of this strange new land, hoping to lose himself in its corners and alleys, hoping that anonymity could still be found where the heat and the sea met. After a few days of exploring Santos, Hank's restlessness drove him to São Paulo, a sprawling concrete jungle that loomed in the distance. He caught a bus, Bau tucked safely in his jacket, feeling an odd mix of excitement and dread. The moment he arrived, the city's pulse hit him like a sledgehammer. The streets buzzed with a cacophony of honking cars, shouting vendors, and the distant thrum of electronic music seeping out of bars. It was everything he despised:

overcrowded, loud, and full of people rushing to nowhere. He felt like a ghost wandering through a parade of flesh and noise, a mere whisper in a city that thrived on chaos. Hank quickly discovered that São Paulo had none of the charm he sought. The buildings loomed over him, grim and oppressive, as if they were eager to swallow him whole. The air was thick with exhaust and the scent of street food—fried, greasy, and unappealing to his battered senses. He passed vendors hawking everything from pastel de feira to coxinha, but even the culinary delights felt hollow in the oppressive heat. The people were an endless blur, rushing past him, their faces a mix of indifference and impatience. Conversations flared up and died in an instant, as if no one had time to connect. Hank tried to engage with a few locals, but their eyes flickered with disinterest, as if he were just another wandering stray in a city that had long since lost its heart. And the women? Just as he had expected, they were everywhere, beautiful and sharp, but as cold and calculating as the city itself. Each glance felt like a transaction, a business deal rather than an invitation. No flirtation without the expectation of cash or favors—money changed hands quicker than smiles, and Hank found himself feeling more isolated than ever. Even Bau seemed to sense the shift. The kitten, once so spirited at sea, now curled up tightly in Hank's jacket, looking out

with wary eyes. It was as if they both understood that they had stumbled into a place that thrived on pretense, where genuine connections were as rare as a clear sky. Hank sought solace in a dive bar, hoping to drown his disdain in cheap beer and muted jazz. But the music was just another layer of noise in the chaotic city symphony. He couldn't escape the feeling that he was lost in a vast machine, a cog that didn't fit, grinding away in a place that demanded so much but offered nothing in return. After a few drinks, he slumped in a corner, staring into his glass, battling a wave of despair. He felt the familiar weight of the monster creeping back in, gnawing at him, whispering that he was as invisible here as he had been everywhere else. The realization settled in: no matter how far he wandered, he could never outrun himself, and São Paulo only magnified that truth. As Hank wandered through São Paulo, he couldn't shake the feeling that he had landed in a caricature of North American culture, dressed up in the vibrant colors of Brazil. Everywhere he looked, there were echoes of the States—the flashy brands, the blaring pop music that seemed to drown out any sense of local identity, and the clamor for status that filled the air like a thick fog. He observed the crowds, clad in designer jeans and logo-emblazoned shirts, strutting down the streets as if every sidewalk were a runway. The city buzzed with ostentation, the latest fashion trends

draped over bodies that desperately sought validation through consumption. To Hank, it felt like a performance, a hollow echo of what it meant to be American, all wrapped up in a package of tropical flair. The bars and restaurants pulsed with a soundtrack of hip-hop and top 40 hits, drowning out any semblance of traditional Brazilian rhythms. It was as if São Paulo had forgotten its roots, trading samba and bossa nova for a sound that felt more at home in a Los Angeles club than in the heart of Brazil. Even the food seemed tailored to the palates of tourists, offering up overpriced versions of American fast food with a local twist—a sad blend of what was and what could never be. Hank's eyes rolled as he watched groups of young people snap selfies with their gourmet burgers, the glow of their screens illuminating their faces like a false dawn. The endless pursuit of likes and followers was palpable, and it made him want to retreat into the shadows. He missed the authenticity he had glimpsed in smaller towns, where life was less about appearances and more about the struggle beneath. The ostentatious displays of wealth twisted his stomach. Luxury cars crawled past him like unwelcome specters, flaunting their shiny surfaces, while he watched people jostle for space in front of high-end boutiques, desperate to keep up with the relentless demands of status. Hank had spent his life running from the very materialism these

people seemed to worship. In this city, everything was a transaction—a beautiful façade covering a deep void. The constant mimicry made Hank feel like a ghost in a world of imitators. He sat in yet another dive bar, nursing a drink that tasted more like regret than alcohol. He stared into the bottom of his glass, feeling the walls closing in around him. The more he observed, the more he realized he was no longer just a wanderer; he was an unwitting witness to the absurdity of it all. And as he watched the parade of wannabes outside, Hank couldn't help but think that in trying to emulate someone else's dream, they had lost their own. Despite his growing disdain for the ostentatiousness that surrounded him, Hank discovered an unexpected pleasure in cachaça, the local spirit made from fermented sugarcane. It was a revelation—a drink that had depth and character, unlike the cheap beer and watered-down cocktails he usually drowned his sorrows in. As he sampled various brands in different bars, Hank became something of a connoisseur, relishing the rich flavors and the subtle notes that danced across his palate. Each sip transported him away from the blaring pop music and the superficiality that filled the city, offering a glimpse into the heart of Brazilian culture he had initially overlooked. He found himself drawn to the artisanal distilleries that dotted the outskirts of São Paulo, where cachaça was crafted with care, each bottle a testament to

local traditions. In those hidden spots, he met passionate makers who poured their souls into every batch, and Hank felt a rare connection with them, even if it was fleeting. They understood the beauty of a drink that held history, a story worth telling. With each tasting, Hank honed his palate, learning to distinguish between the grassy notes of fresh cane and the earthy tones of aged varieties. He delighted in the complexity of the spirit, noting how it could evoke memories of the tropics with just a whiff. In a city that felt so disconnected from authenticity, cachaça became a tether, grounding him in a moment of genuine pleasure amid the chaos. As he savored his newfound appreciation for cachaça, Hank couldn't help but feel a little lighter. Perhaps, in this vast sea of imitation and materialism, he had found something real. A small sanctuary in a glass—a taste of Brazil that resonated with him, allowing him to escape, if only for a moment, the hollow noise of a city lost in pretense. As Hank strolled along Avenida Paulista, lost in thought and nursing a freshly purchased bottle of cachaça, he couldn't shake the feeling of being an outsider in this vibrant city. The mix of towering skyscrapers and bustling crowds reminded him of Manhattan, but it felt more like a theater production than reality, everyone playing their roles in a script he couldn't quite grasp. Suddenly, a voice broke through the din, pulling him from his reverie. A man

approached, animated and gesturing wildly, his words tumbling out in rapid-fire Portuguese. Hank stood there, bewildered, catching only fragments of the conversation. “Hanky Oucky!” the man exclaimed, pointing excitedly at Hank as if he were the star of some long-forgotten show. The phrase echoed in Hank’s mind, familiar yet alien, as the rest of the speech washed over him like a tidal wave. He squinted at the man, trying to make sense of what he was saying. The only word he understood was his name, distorted into something absurd. The crowd around them moved like a river, indifferent to the peculiar scene unfolding. Hank felt a flicker of annoyance and intrigue. Who was this guy? Did he know him from the dive bars? Or was it something else? The man continued, speaking with fervor and passion, punctuating his sentences with grand gestures. Hank tried to decipher the intent behind those frantic movements, but all he could do was smile awkwardly, nodding as if he understood.

“Sorry, man, I don’t speak Portuguese,” Hank finally admitted, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender. The man paused, his expression shifting from enthusiasm to confusion, then back to a grin. He repeated, “Hanky Oucky!” with an infectious laugh that rang through the bustling street.

Hank couldn’t help but chuckle along, despite his bafflement. There was something strangely endearing

about this random encounter, this misplaced enthusiasm directed at him. The man seemed to embody the very spirit of the city—vibrant, chaotic, and utterly incomprehensible. As the conversation fizzled, the man clapped Hank on the back, leaving him with a friendly “Até logo!” before disappearing into the throng. Hank stood there, still grasping the bottle of cachaça, contemplating the strange interplay of connection and disconnection. It was a moment of absurdity that somehow encapsulated his entire experience in Brazil: a wild dance of languages, cultures, and expectations that he could never quite fit into. But for a brief second, even in his bewilderment, he felt like he belonged to something larger, if only as a peculiar curiosity in the bustling tapestry of São Paulo. The moment Hank stepped back into the thrumming chaos of Avenida Paulista, he sensed it—an electric undercurrent, the kind that prickled at the back of his neck. It started with a few curious glances, but within 24 hours, he had transformed from a nameless drifter into the unwitting star of a viral phenomenon. Everywhere he turned, smartphones were aimed at him like cameras in a relentless paparazzi swarm. People whispered and pointed, capturing snippets of his bewildered expressions, their laughter echoing like taunts in the back of his mind. The phrase “Hanky Oucky” had taken on a life of its own, trending

across social media platforms, making him the subject of memes, videos, and inside jokes. It felt like the universe had conspired to turn him into a spectacle, a punchline he never agreed to be part of. He couldn't take it anymore. Hank turned on his heel and bolted down the street, weaving through the crowd with a desperation that was all too familiar. With every step, he felt the weight of eyes on him, and the realization hit like a punch to the gut: he was trapped in a spotlight he never wanted. "Hanky Oucky" echoed in his ears, a mocking refrain that seemed to follow him, taunting him as he dashed into the labyrinth of side streets. The colorful storefronts blurred together, the laughter and chatter fading into a distant hum. He could feel the pulse of the city thrumming in his veins, but instead of excitement, it sent waves of anxiety crashing over him. Hank ducked into a narrow alley, hoping to catch his breath away from prying eyes. The alley was littered with refuse, a stark contrast to the polished streets above. He leaned against a cool brick wall, his heart racing, struggling to comprehend how he had ended up here—again. How had he become a spectacle in a city that felt so alien? In the dim light, Hank considered his next move. The thought of grabbing Bau and hitting the road again filled him with a sense of urgency. He could disappear, just like he had before. He had become adept at running away, slipping through the

cracks of the world like water through fingers. But now, the pressure felt insurmountable. As he steadied himself, the murmur of the city resumed, the chaos continuing without him. He could either embrace the absurdity of it all or let it consume him. With a deep breath, he made his decision. He'd grab Bau, seek out a bus or a ride, and leave behind the flashing screens and curious glances. It was time to run again, to vanish into the tapestry of Brazil, before the weight of this newfound notoriety dragged him down. Hank slumped against the alley wall, the realization washing over him like a cold wave: "Hanky Oucky" was no random phrase; it was the city's distorted echo of his own name, a revelation that hit harder than any punch. He had been found, and the weight of that discovery pressed down on him like a leaden blanket. The vibrant chaos of São Paulo had morphed into a digital stage, and he was the reluctant star of a show he never auditioned for. This wasn't just a fleeting moment of attention; it was the beginning of something he couldn't control. In the frenzy of social media, people had taken his existence and twisted it into a spectacle. The thought made his skin crawl. He pushed away from the wall, heart racing. The allure of anonymity had evaporated, and with it, the last threads of his resolve to stay in Brazil. It was clear: he had to get out, and fast. Uruguay loomed on the horizon like a distant mirage, promising the possibility of

escape and perhaps the solace he craved. Hank stepped back onto the bustling streets, a ghost among the living. He navigated through the throngs of people, avoiding the eye of anyone who might recognize him. With each hurried step, he felt the urgency intensify. He needed to find Bau, grab what little he had, and hightail it to the bus station. As he made his way through the maze of Avenida Paulista, the city felt more like a prison than a playground. Hank ducked into a small café, ordering the strongest coffee they had. He needed clarity, a plan to get to Uruguay without leaving a trace. Sipping the bitter brew, he scoured the room for any sign of the unexpected fame that had trapped him. He caught snippets of conversation—people buzzing about the “Hanky Oucky” phenomenon, speculating who he was and what he represented. The whispers twisted in his gut like a snake, tightening around his resolve. He had to vanish. With his coffee drained and his heart set, Hank slipped out the back door, rejoining the crowd with renewed determination. He had no time to linger, no time to ponder what had brought him to this moment. It was all about survival now, about shedding the skin of notoriety like a snake. He finally spotted a bus station in the distance, its faded sign barely legible above the thrumming noise of the street. Hank quickened his pace, mind racing with thoughts of Bau and the freedom that

awaited him. Uruguay would be the next chapter—a blank slate, a chance to slip into the background where no one would know his name, where he could be just Hank Howky again. As he reached the bus station, he could feel the weight lifting, if only slightly. He could hear the distant roar of the engines, feel the air humming with the promise of escape. It was time to leave behind the flashing screens and the city that had briefly trapped him in its web. He was heading for Uruguay, where he could once again become just another face in the crowd, free to drift without the burden of expectation.

Off the boat, the lingering smell of the sea clinging to his clothes. Another ship had carried him south, far from the Brazilian glare and the relentless thrum of smartphones capturing his every move. Now, he found himself in Montevideo, a city with crumbling art-deco architecture, where the river met the ocean and time seemed to drag its feet. Montevideo welcomed him with a strange sense of ease, like a weary host shrugging off yet another unexpected guest. The streets felt half-asleep, lined with buildings that whispered of elegance long past. Each corner seemed to harbor a small grill, plumes of smoke rising from asado joints where beef sizzled on open flames. Hank quickly discovered that for the price of a cheap sandwich, you could get enough weed to last a week. Here, even in the haze of a high, he felt more like a part of the landscape, blending into the background instead of being some internet curiosity. His days blurred into a slow, drifting rhythm. He wandered the streets, the soles of his shoes slapping against cracked pavements, a flask in one hand and a roll-up in the other. Bau, his little feline stowaway, had adapted too—napping on balconies warmed by the sun, eyes half-closed but always watchful. Sometimes, Hank thought about the article that stranger handed him near the Nevada border, “Sleeper No. 21: The Underground Masterpiece of Hank Howky.” But that thought faded as quickly as the smoke from his joint,

carried away on the sea breeze. The nights held a surprising peace, a kind Hank hadn't known in years. Kids played football in the middle of the street, their laughter ringing through the air like a melody, bouncing off the worn-out walls and mixing with the faint murmur of radios. They played with a fearlessness he hadn't seen since his own youth—like the world had yet to teach them its sharp edges. And maybe, just maybe, they were right to feel safe here. Even the stray dogs seemed content, roaming through alleys with a leisurely gait, as if they too understood that this place held no urgency. For a moment, Hank felt a sense of almost belonging. Montevideo didn't ask questions; it didn't prod at his past or care about his sudden, shifty fame. It let him exist, drink, smoke, ramble his poetry to the wind without expecting answers. Here, anonymity wasn't an escape, but a quiet allowance—permission to just be. He knew it wouldn't last, that something would pull him back into the restless currents, but for now, Montevideo was a small, forgotten corner of the world where he could breathe. And so, he settled into the city's rhythms, letting its slow, smoky waltz guide his weary steps. Hank met her in a joint tucked away in a dimly lit alley, a place where weed and wine flowed with the same lazy rhythm as the city outside. She had a way of talking that drew him in, a softness that made the smoke-filled air feel lighter. They

slipped away together, into a cheap room overlooking the quiet streets, a single yellow bulb casting shadows on the peeling walls. What followed was unlike anything Hank had known—pure, unguarded, almost childlike in its sincerity. Her touch was gentle, curious, without the rough edges he was used to, no trace of the dark games that usually fueled his nights. It was as if she approached intimacy the same way Uruguayans approached life: with a casual grace, unburdened by shame or pretense, letting things unfold naturally. For a while, Hank found himself drawn into that simplicity. It felt like standing under a cool shower after years of hot, scalding water. She moved with a freedom that made him feel like they were the only two people left in a world that had forgotten how to complicate love. And for that brief time, he wondered if this was how it should have always been—a kind of connection that asked for nothing more than the warmth of another body. But deep down, he knew it was foreign territory for him. Hank's mind, twisted and seasoned by years of excess, craved something darker, something less innocent. As she slept beside him, her breath steady and soft, he lay awake, feeling like an outsider in his own skin. The purity of the experience, while beautiful, was like a mirror held up to his own depravity. She was everything sweet and unblemished; he was the shadow that couldn't escape its own darkness. As the first light of dawn crept

through the window, Hank knew that whatever had happened between them belonged to a world he could never inhabit. It wasn't the city that had failed to understand him, or even the girl—it was him, always him, carrying his mess and scars like a badge. He slipped out of bed, leaving behind a note of awkward gratitude, knowing she'd move on without a second thought, while he'd keep this fleeting, bitter taste of what he could never truly hold.

A cold concrete under the bridge, the Rio de la Plata's dark waters flowing nearby. He clutched a half-empty bottle of cheap Malbec, its contents mirroring the crimson sky fading into the night. Buenos Aires was changing, slipping from the sophistication he remembered and loved—losing its tango soul, its literary charm, and the warmth of its old cafes. Now, each day felt more like São Paulo in disguise, with skyscrapers rising like weeds, favelas edging closer, and conversations turning to the cost of living instead of poetry or politics. The city was becoming louder, more frantic, as if it were trying to keep pace with the chaos of its neighbors. He could still find traces of the old Buenos Aires in hidden corners: a dusty bookshop in San Telmo, a quiet bar on Avenida de Mayo where the whiskey was still poured with reverence. But those places were fewer now, and each visit felt like a farewell. Hank muttered to himself, "Buenos Aires is like a woman who forgets who she used to be, putting on cheap makeup to fit in at the wrong parties." He laughed bitterly at his own poetic musings. He could imagine Borges rolling in his grave, disapproving of this new version of the city—a place where beauty had become an afterthought, sacrificed for the sake of progress or whatever the hell it was they were calling this transformation. He closed his eyes, the wine lulling him into a haze, and thought of the mornings. In

the dawn, the city still held a certain truth, a quiet magic in the empty streets, where the first light touched the worn façades of the old buildings. In those moments, it was still the Buenos Aires he had chased across years and borders. But by noon, that illusion shattered under the sun's glare, revealing the cracks, the noise, the desperate hustle that had become the city's new rhythm. The sound of waves splashing against the stone brought him back, but he felt like a ghost lingering in a place that had forgotten its own spirit. Somewhere nearby, Bau, his kitten, prowled among the shadows, chasing whatever moved—rats, maybe, or the whispers of a city's past. Hank found the car in a field outside Buenos Aires, just sitting there like it was waiting for him. The paint was chipped and flaking, the body speckled with rust, but the keys dangled from the ignition, glinting in the midday sun. He looked around, half-expecting someone to come out and claim it, but there was no one, just the steady whisper of the wind brushing the tall grass. He slid into the driver's seat, turned the key, and the engine rumbled to life—a sound that broke the stillness of the pampas like a reluctant confession. He didn't think of it as stealing; it wasn't theft if no one was around to notice. He just took the car, like you might take a free drink left unattended at the bar. Maybe it had always been meant for him. With the windows rolled down, he let the dry, hot air rush in,

stinging his face. The landscape unfurled around him, flat as a stretched canvas, the earth and sky stitched together in an endless seam. There were no mountains to guide him, no trees to interrupt the view—just an empty horizon that seemed to promise everything and nothing all at once. He felt a strange sense of freedom out there in the pampa, where time seemed to stretch as thin as the shadow of a single cloud drifting lazily across the sun-bleached sky. The radio was dead, so he drove in silence, with only the hum of the engine and the wind's low moan to keep him company. It was a kind of peace he hadn't known he craved, the kind you can only find when you're moving through a place that's got no use for you. For a moment, Hank imagined that if he drove far enough, beyond the horizon where the sky dipped to meet the earth, he might find something unspoiled—something not yet touched by the rot of the world he'd been drifting through. But he knew better. Out here, even hope would evaporate like a mirage. The pampa was endless, meaningless, absurd, pure—a reflection of the sky above it, a perfect mirror for the emptiness inside him. He pressed the gas pedal a little harder, feeling the car surge beneath him, a low growl that matched the ache in his chest. There was nothing behind him but a life he could hardly remember, and nothing ahead but the flat, unbroken horizon. And maybe that was all he needed

right now—a road that went on forever, with no promises and no destinations. Just him, the car, and the open pampa, all rolling on under a sky that stretched as far as he could imagine, and further still. Bau took to the car like it was his own personal chariot. He scrambled up onto the dashboard, his little paws tapping rhythmically as he found his balance. With the wind streaming through the open window, he dangled his head from side to side, the way a metalhead might in the middle of a guitar solo. His ears flapped with each bump in the road, and his eyes squinted against the sun, but he looked like he was having the time of his life. Hank glanced over and couldn't help but crack a smile—one of those rare ones that almost hurt, like he wasn't used to the movement of those muscles. Bau's enthusiasm was infectious. It was a strange sight—this tiny kitten headbanging to the rhythm of a beaten-up sedan racing through the barren pampa—but somehow it fit. Out here, where nothing made sense, everything seemed to fit just right.

It was not far from Mendoza, at the edge of the pampa before the Andes, that Hank Howky screeched the car to a halt. Dust from the flat, endless road swirled in the air, a fitting haze to match his sudden, irrational sense of panic. He threw the door open and jumped out, his eyes wide, darting left and right as if expecting someone,

something, to emerge from the horizon. But there was no one. Just the dead silence of the plains, broken only by the rustle of the wind and the soft creak of the car settling on its old suspension. Bau remained unfazed. He sat on the dashboard, head bobbing to an imaginary beat, oblivious to the fear that gripped his human. To Bau, the world was just an endless series of naps and occasional meals. To Hank, it was a relentless chase, one he didn't quite understand. He stood there, sweat trickling down his back, heart racing, staring into the distance as if the pampa could spit out some kind of answer.

"How can a man be so stupid to get this far without asking questions?" he muttered to himself, running a shaky hand through his greasy hair.

He hadn't asked the questions because, until now, they didn't seem to matter. He had slipped through life, city to city, continent to continent, like a ghost. But ghosts didn't need money. Hank, somehow, always ended up with cash in his pockets—bills folded neatly, even when he started with none. The drinks, the gas, the shitty motels—they were all paid for, but he couldn't remember how. He looked down at his hands, as if expecting them to hold some kind of clue. There was nothing. No trail to follow, no breadcrumbs leading back to a moment where it all made sense. Since he left the States, since he started hitchhiking through America, he hadn't worked a single

day. Not a shift, not a gig. Yet he had enough to get by, to move forward, to keep running. And run he had. But now... now he wasn't so sure. He turned back to the car—a beat-up relic he'd found lying in a field outside Buenos Aires. It wasn't stealing. Not really. The keys had been in the ignition, and no one was around. It was just there, waiting, like everything else in his life. A free ride to nowhere. Bau had loved it from the start, bouncing up and down on the dashboard like he was at a rock concert. Hank looked out at the horizon again, at the looming shadow of the Andes, and felt the pit in his stomach gnawing at him. Something had been following him since he left the US, since he drifted from one dive bar to the next, sinking deeper into his booze-soaked obscurity. He called it the monster, the pit, the darkness—his depression, though he never named it as such. But now, it wasn't just the darkness anymore. It was something else. Something that always made sure there was money in his pocket, a bed for his drunken head, and enough booze to drown his thoughts. And suddenly, standing there in the middle of nowhere, Hank realized the terrifying truth: you don't get something for nothing. You can't live like this, not forever. Sooner or later, someone's gonna come to collect.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath, taking a long, hard look at the empty road stretching behind him.

His breath hitched. He couldn't see them, but he knew. He just knew. They were out there, somewhere, closing in. With a sigh, he climbed back into the car. Bau gave him a sideways glance before flopping down for another nap, unconcerned with the trouble brewing in Hank's soul. He slammed the door, started the engine, and floored it. It was time to run again, but for the first time in his life, Hank wondered how far he could actually go before he ran out of road.

The Mendoza River whispered in the dark, its current moving slowly under the thin veil of moonlight. Hank and Bau had taken shelter under a truck tarpaulin, its loose fabric flapping like a torn sail in the wind. Bau slept peacefully on Hank's chest, his tiny paws twitching in some feline dream. But Hank remained awake, his eyes sharp, ears attuned to the night. Something was off, like a crackle in the static of the universe. And then it happened: a soft rustle, the faint pressure of fingers against the pocket of his jacket. Hank moved faster than the river current, seizing the arm and yanking it down with him, rolling the stranger into the dirt. In a heartbeat, Hank had the man pinned, twisting his wrist in a painful hold.

"Who are you?" Hank growled, his voice rough, the words carrying a cold edge. Bau, now awake, peered down at the stranger with sleepy curiosity, as if evaluating this new intruder in their small, chaotic world. The man wheezed, face pressed into the ground, his breath fogging the cold air. He tried to keep his composure, but fear made his voice tremble.

"Wait, wait! I'm with Blue Pine Publishing!" His free hand fumbled in the dirt, waving a crumpled business card and a letter. Hank's eyes narrowed, his grip unyielding.

"Blue Pine Publishing? Well, congrats on your life choices, pal, but I don't remember scheduling any alleyway appointments tonight." He twisted the wrist a little more, savoring the pained yelp it provoked.

The man winced, struggling to catch his breath. "We... we want to buy the rights to *Sleeper No. 21*. It's... it's become a sensation, and we thought—"

Hank cut him off with a dry, bitter laugh. "*Sleeper No. 21*? That old ghost? Is that what they're calling it these days?" He loosened his grip just enough for the man to slip the business card into his other hand, a small white rectangle that gleamed faintly in the moonlight. Bau, sensing the tension dissipate, batted at the card with one paw, then lost interest and curled back up on Hank's chest. Hank eased his grip and stood, dragging the man up with him. The stranger brushed dirt from his coat, trying to regain some dignity, though his arm throbbed from Hank's iron grip. He adjusted his glasses, catching his breath.

"We know how... unconventional you are, Mr. Howky," he said, trying to sound professional. "But there's a lot of money in this. *Sleeper No. 21*—it's touched people. We think it could be even bigger if—"

Hank stopped him with a dismissive wave, pocketing the card. "Yeah, yeah, keep your pitch. I'll think about it,

maybe. Now get lost before Bau here decides you're tonight's plaything."

The stranger nodded eagerly and stumbled back into the night, vanishing as quickly as he'd come. Hank leaned back against the truck, staring at the card, feeling the absurdity of it all. Fame, success—those were things that happened to other people. But now, it seemed like the ghosts he'd tried to leave behind were catching up, even here on the banks of the Mendoza.

Hank and Bau found themselves hitching a ride on a battered truck crossing the rugged Andes, the engine growling like a dying beast. The driver, a silent Chilean, barely spoke, and Hank didn't mind. He watched the peaks looming, Bau perched on his lap, eyes wide, absorbing the dramatic landscape with the curiosity only a kitten could muster. When they finally descended into Santiago, Hank felt that familiar, aching thirst. The city, with its mishmash of urban chaos and majestic mountains, called to him. He quickly found solace in the wine—rivers of it, pouring down his throat as if to drown whatever thoughts the pampa hadn't washed away. One night, while deep in his usual haze at a corner bar, Hank met a girl. She was beautiful in that disheveled, earnest way only a woman in a broken city could be. There was nothing glamorous about her, just pure gratitude and hunger for something real. Hank, far too drunk to pretend or posture, found himself in her bed hours later. She clung to him with desperation, not for pleasure alone but for something more—a break from the disappointment she'd known with every other man. Hank, in his peculiar sincerity, gave her that. Not because he cared, but because, unlike most of the selfish bastards she'd slept with, he didn't think about anything except the moment. For her, that was enough. She gave herself over to him with wide-eyed amazement, as if no one had ever

bothered to notice she existed before. For a while, the sex was as relentless as the wine—an indulgence that blurred time and consciousness. But, as always, Hank could feel the pull of the road calling him back. Santiago wasn't meant to keep him, and soon, he'd be drifting away again, dragging Bau along for whatever strange ride came next. Hank Howky didn't just travel north; he drifted, like a leaf caught in a slow, unrelenting current. From Santiago, he picked up a "car made of oblivion" at a forgotten transit station, where dawn never quite arrived. It was some rundown hunk of metal, the kind of car that only someone who didn't care about making it anywhere would take. But Hank didn't care. He was resolved to keep rolling, and that's what he did. North, north, and more north—fleeing something, chasing nothing. Bau, curled up in Hank's pocket, slept most of the way, oblivious to the road that stretched endlessly ahead. Hank envied him—the cat had none of his burdens, none of the ghosts that lingered in the rearview mirror. Run Run went north, and so did Hank, with nothing but the hum of the engine and the desolation of the desert keeping him company. Somewhere near Vallenar, fate decided to get ironic. The hurricane that had swept through days earlier had left a mess—a broken bridge, a dismal landscape of debris, and an eerie stillness in the air. Hank stopped the car at the edge of the wreckage. There was no turning back now,

not for him. With Bau safely tucked into his jacket, he crossed on foot, stepping carefully on the remains of what had once been a bridge. Each step felt like a gamble, but then again, Hank had always been a man who bet against the odds. He left Antofagasta without leaving a trace, as if he'd never been there at all. Not that anyone cared. His trip became more absurd with each passing day, as if the universe was mocking his attempts to outrun his own legend. Tamarugal came and went, just another pit stop on the road to nowhere. There, he found a rock that looked as good as any to sit on and contemplate life's absurdities. So he sat, staring into the endless desert, and began to ramble. At first, it was the usual nonsense—about the futility of it all, about how life was a grand illusion, a game rigged from the start. He spoke to no one in particular, though Bau's occasional glance made it seem like the cat was listening. Hank talked about death being the only real thing left, the only thing that made any sense. But then, he found himself trailing off, not sure where the words were coming from anymore. "Never," he muttered, as if the word held some deeper meaning. "And also..." He paused, trying to follow his own thought process. Was there a point to any of this? Was there ever? In the end, Hank realized it didn't matter. He was still going north, still rolling, still outrunning something he couldn't quite name. And death? Well, it would catch up

eventually, like everything else. But for now, there was nothing to do but sit on that rock, in that desert, with Bau beside him, and wait for the next stretch of road to appear.

The cracked shoreline of Iquique, the relentless Pacific wind blowing through his thinning hair. Bau was curled up in his jacket, snoozing away like nothing in the world mattered. But Hank knew better. His pocket was stuffed with cash again, and he hadn't even lifted a finger. Somehow, he was still being followed, hunted down by his own myth—the ghost of Hank Howky, poet of the last ones, bastard prophet of the forgotten. He spat on the ground and took a long pull from his bottle, pisco mixed with Pica lemon juice, the only thing keeping him tethered to the present. But even that was starting to taste like defeat. There was no escape anymore. He had crossed every border, taken every dusty road, boarded every cargo ship running from himself—and for what? The world still knew his name, even if he didn't know why. *Sleeper No. 21*—the title haunted him. A book he barely remembered writing, a book that had somehow elevated him from gutter poet to some cult hero of the disillusioned.

"How the hell did this happen, Bau?" he muttered, the kitten lazily stretching in response, not offering any answers.

With the bottle drained, Hank crushed it under his boot and scanned the harbor. It was time. He was done running. Whoever was behind this—publishers, fans, demons, God, the whole cruel universe—he'd face them now. He staggered toward the nearest cargo ship. Flags of countries he didn't care to identify flapped overhead. The crew looked at him with mild suspicion but didn't stop him from climbing aboard. Cash had a way of smoothing the path, and he had more than enough of it stuffed in his ratty jeans. The ship's engine rumbled to life, and Hank found a corner below deck, a grimy room that smelled like fish and sweat. He dropped onto the floor, pulling Bau from his jacket and setting him on his chest. The little guy purred, unaware of the existential crisis bearing down on his human.

"So, this is it, Bau. Time to face whatever this is. Maybe I'll be crucified, maybe I'll just end up signing autographs. Hell, maybe I'll get thrown overboard. But at least I won't have to guard my pockets ever again."

The ship began its slow crawl north, the water dark and endless beneath them. Hank closed his eyes, feeling the weight of the years, the booze, the words he wrote and forgot about. All the things he'd run from, including himself, now just a cargo ship ride away. He didn't know where the ship would dock. He didn't care. North was as good a direction as any. North, toward the end of his

story, toward whatever the hell it was that waited for him in the wreckage of his own legacy.

They disembarked in San Diego, the salty air of the Pacific mixing with the fumes of ship engines. Bau stretched, taking in the unfamiliar dock with a yawn. Hank, still hungover from his last swigs of pisco, rubbed his eyes and took in the scene. Before he could process where he'd washed up this time, a battered, sun-bleached car with duct-taped windows screeched to a halt near the docks. The driver's door flung open with a dramatic flair, and out stepped a man who looked like he'd time-traveled from a different reality. The man's outfit was a bizarre mishmash: a faded Hawaiian shirt splattered with garish palm trees, a polka-dotted tie knotted tightly around his neck, and a pair of aviator shades that barely concealed his wild eyes. A cigarette, stuck into an absurdly long, ornate mouthpiece, dangled from his lips, trailing a steady plume of smoke that swirled around him like a personal storm cloud. He smiled with a manic glint, baring his teeth in a way that brought to mind Klaus Kinski's crazed determination in **Fitzcarraldo**—that unhinged ambition to conquer something, even if it was just his own shadow.

"Welcome to California, Mr. Howky," the man rasped, the smoke billowing out with every word.

His voice carried a mixture of nicotine and mischief. Hank's hand reflexively tightened around his bag. He had no idea who this lunatic was, but he had the sinking feeling this wasn't a casual fan or a random beach-town eccentric. The man's gaze held that unsettling knowing look, like he had been expecting Hank's arrival long before Hank had even set foot on the cargo ship. Bau hissed softly, the fur along his back standing on end. Hank sighed, adjusted the collar of his worn jacket, and stared back at the stranger with the kind of weary defiance only a man who'd run from fame and life could muster.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?" Hank asked, lighting a cigarette of his own, though it looked pitiful compared to the extravagant contraption hanging from the stranger's lips. The man laughed, the sound crackling like old vinyl, then gestured with a theatrical flourish.

"I'm your next headache, or your next way out. That depends, Mr. Howky. Care for a ride?"

Hank stared at him for a moment, contemplating whether to bolt or play along. But the lure of curiosity—and the ever-present sensation that running was pointless—compelled him to nod. He and Bau climbed into the car, and as the engine sputtered to life, Hank wondered if this detour through the underbelly of San Diego would finally bring answers or just more questions. The wheels

screeched as they pulled away from the docks, the man's laugh echoing against the sea breeze, as if he had just snared a wild bird in his net. The man with the mouthpiece shoved a hefty stack of papers into Hank's chest. The title on the top page simply read "CONTRACT" in block letters. Hank could already feel his brain fogging over at the sight of it. The words below might as well have been written in ancient Sumerian for all he could decipher. Legalese, with its cryptic clauses and endless paragraphs, was the perfect labyrinth designed to trap a guy like Hank. But then, there were those numbers. Big, fat, mouth-watering numbers—an advance that could keep him in booze for years, a lifelong pension that almost sounded like he wouldn't need to trade poetry for cat food anymore, and a health insurance plan for Bau, his little accomplice. Hank pictured Bau lounging in the lap of luxury, snacking on premium salmon kibble, and that alone was enough to make him consider signing.

"Look, it's simple, Mr. Howky," the man in the mouthpiece drawled, smoothing back his gelled hair like he was on the verge of a stock photo pose. "All you have to do is sign, and we take care of everything. No more sleeping under bridges, no more looking over your shoulder."

Hank wasn't buying it. "Yeah, well, I need time to think about it," he replied. "And by 'think,' I mean drink. Like twelve drinks, give or take a few. Maybe, I dunno, enough to blur your greasy face out of my memory."

The man didn't flinch, just smiled wider. "Take your time, Mr. Howky, but remember—opportunities like this don't last forever. And there's only so much time before someone else comes along and—"

Hank cut him off with a wave of his hand. He grabbed the contract with one hand and a bottle of cheap red wine with the other. He couldn't read the words, but he could read that smirk and those empty promises better than any contract. But damn, that pension... Bau deserved a cushy retirement, even if Hank's liver was a lost cause. He shuffled off, clutching the papers under his arm, with the weight of promises and doubts pressing down on his shoulders.

The following day, Hank Howky, bleary-eyed but with a hint of mischief gleaming in his gaze, shuffled into a dingy cafe by the river bank, cradling a crumpled piece of paper. The publishing company's rep, sporting a pristine suit that stood out in the dusty surroundings, was already there, sitting straight-backed with a hopeful expression—clearly a man who had never signed a contract written on a beermat. Hank plunked down the paper on the table, an

ink-stained beermat awkwardly taped to the back of the actual contract. With a theatrical flourish, he flipped it over to reveal a hastily scrawled addendum: "Lifetime supply of Pol Roger champagne, 30-year-old Glenfiddich, and no questions asked." Hank's eyes gleamed, and he tilted his head toward the publishing rep, as if daring him to protest. "Not negotiable," Hank muttered, taking a long drag from a cigarette that looked like it might've been lit hours ago. Just when the rep thought this couldn't get any stranger, Hank leaned over, picked up Bau from where he was curled up in the pocket of Hank's oversized coat, and produced an ink pad. With the precision of a man who's done this a few too many times, Hank dipped Bau's little paw in the ink and pressed it against the back of the paper. A smudgy paw print—Bau's first ever "pawtograph"—emerged on the addendum. The publishing rep blinked, unsure if he should be amused or alarmed, but Hank was already leaning back in his chair, savoring the moment. "Well, champ? You want my rights or not? I'm told Bau's pawtograph alone doubles the market value." The rep, bewildered and eager to secure the deal, pulled out a pen and shakily signed on the dotted line. And just like that, the absurd terms were sealed—Hank and Bau officially had their ticket to a life drenched in champagne and aged whisky.

He stumbled into the grand hall of the University, swaying like a ship caught in a storm, clutching a nearly empty bottle of 30-year-old Glenfiddich. He was supposed to be delivering a *lectio magistralis* on his poetry—a big deal, apparently. The kind of thing you got invited to when the academic world decided that your ramblings about the bottom rungs of society actually meant something profound. Hank hadn't quite figured out what that something was, but he liked that it came with free booze and a podium to lean on. He tripped up the steps to the stage, barely catching himself on the lectern. He reached into his battered coat and extracted Bau, the stray kitten who'd become his one constant companion, and placed him front and center on the lectern as if he were about to deliver the lecture himself. Bau, unfazed by the spotlight, stretched lazily and curled into a comfortable ball, eyeing the crowd like he might doze off any second. The hall was packed—professors in tweed jackets, aspiring poets with notebooks ready, and curious onlookers hoping to witness the trainwreck they'd read about online. Hank squinted at them through bleary eyes, took another swig from the Glenfiddich, and began what could generously be called a speech.

“You all came here... thinkin’ you’re gonna hear somethin’... somethin’ ‘bout beauty, an’ pain, an’ all that junk.” His voice was thick with whisky, rolling over his words like waves over rocks. “But what I got... what I really got... is a bottle, a goddamn bottle... and a cat who knows more ‘bout life than any of you. Ain’t that right, Bau?”

Bau responded with a disinterested yawn, then started purring, the sound carrying over the microphone like a fuzzy backdrop to Hank’s ramblings. Hank leaned heavily on the lectern, his hand tracing the rim of the bottle.
The last ones, the forgotten ones... that’s who I write for, that’s who I am. The ones who slip through the cracks, the ones who sleep under bridges and dream of warmth they’ll never find. Ain’t no glory in it, no goddamn epiphanies... just the everyday grind of being invisible. But let me tell ya, it’s **honest**. It’s the only thing that’s real...”

His voice cracked, and he looked down at Bau, who was now purring steadily, like some sort of metronome. For a moment, it seemed like Hank might find his point—might deliver that profound insight the audience had come to hear. But then he just shook his head, took another gulp, and went on a drunken tangent about a dog from the 70s that no one remembered, but who, he insisted, understood more about human existence than all

the scholars in the room. By the time Hank was done, he had poured out a stream of slurred musings, fragments of poetry, and anecdotes that made sense only to him and maybe Bau. The crowd sat in stunned silence, not sure if they had witnessed a poetic revelation or just the drunken meltdown of a broken man. Either way, it felt like something that would be talked about for years. And as Hank finally sank to the floor beside the lectern, cradling his empty bottle like a newborn, the room filled with a different sound—Bau’s purring, amplified through the microphone, rolling over the audience like a gentle lullaby. In that absurd moment, the cat seemed to say it all: life goes on, indifferent and unperturbed, no matter how much sense you try to make of it. And maybe, just maybe, the purring of a stray cat could be more poetic than any drunken words ever could.

THE END



Whiskey, despair, kitten.

Life's dark punchline.

Hank Howky is a poet, comedian, and professional train wreck, stumbling through life one whiskey-soaked night at a time. His stage is a haze of dimly lit dive bars, his audience a mix of forgotten souls and stray dreams. Between half-finished poems and drunken monologues, Hank finds an unlikely companion in Bau, a stray kitten with more resilience than its owner.

The mona who bangs the door is a raw, darkly hilarious journey through the absurdities of existence. With biting humor and aching humanity, it explores fleeting fame, relentless despair, and the strange comfort of finding meaning in chaos. Gritty, poignant, and unfiltered—this is a tale for anyone who's ever felt like life's punchline.